

# Lachrymae Op. 48

## Benjamin Britten

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# About the Composer: Benjamin Britten

# Benjamin Britten (November 22 1913 – December 4 1976)



- 22 November 1913 – 4 December 1976
- English composer and pianist
- Born in Suffolk, England
- Central figure in 20th century English music
- Had a range of works including operas, other vocal music, chamber and orchestral pieces
- Among his best known pieces are an opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the *War Requiem* (1962); and an orchestral showpiece titled *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945)
- His mother wanted him to be the “4th B” (after Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms) and he revered their music
  - But also cited that as stifling to discovering his own style

# About the Piece

# Lachrymae Op. 48



- Composed for the Scottish violist, William Primrose (1950)
  - “To reward him for coming to the Festival”
- The piece is written based off of themes by the famous English composer, John Dowland
  - “If my complaints could passions move”
  - “Flow my tears”
- Ended up writing the piece overnight due to forgetting about it
  - (so basically most college students in a nutshell)
- Well-received at its premiere
  - Later, Primrose remarked that Lachrymae lacked “fantasy, imagination and drama”
  - Further performances left audiences feeling that Britten was unable to convey what he wanted his music to mean.

# Instrumentation and Genre

- Originally composed for solo viola and piano
  - Premiered at the 1950 Aldeburgh Festival
    - Britten's own festival
  - Primrose performed the viola component while Britten performed the piano part
- At the end of his life, Britten rearranged the piece with string orchestra accompaniment (Op 48a) (1976)
  - Kept a promise to Cecil Aronowitz, violinist of the English Chamber Orchestra
- The piece is an English Nationalist set of Variations
  - Variations on "If my complaints could passions move"

# Form

- “Quasi”-Variation style
  - Named, Reflections on a Song of Dowland; rather than Variations
- The piece is divided up into 10 movements; mainly based on the theme from Dowland’s piece “If my complaints could passions move”
- In the sixth variation, “Flow my tears” is fully quoted (with original harmonies)
  - Lento
  - Allegretto molto comodo
  - Animato
  - Tranquillo
  - Allegro con moto
  - Largamente (Flow my tears quote)
  - Appassionato
  - Alla valse moderato
  - Allegro marcia
    - Alternative part
  - L'istesso tempo

# Musical Elements

- Begins uneasy and mysterious before the strings come together to form a chord and the viola introduces the first theme
  - “If my complaints could passion move”
- The overall texture of the piece is thin and reedy with the strings underneath while the viola playing melody stays consistently rich which gives the piece an interesting layered feeling
- There are moments when the strings underneath become uncomfortable and scratchy and other times when the strings and soloist come together to make beautiful melodies which can be thick at times, airy at others, and deep and brooding at others depending on the key and chords.



# Musical Elements Continued

- The dynamics at the beginning stay relatively soft during the first few minutes of the piece
- The tone and timbre shifts near the 5:52 mark in the video
  - darker and more uneasy, creates a feeling of danger
  - Creates an image of tragedy
- For the most part, the viola drives the piece forward, though seems to lack a clear melody throughout
- Around the 11:30 mark, the tempo of the viola speeds up and becomes more urgent, followed by the rest of the strings
- Ends softly, with a thicker texture and more sorrowful tone (driven forward by the strings)

# Sources

<https://brittenpears.org/explore/benjamin-britten/music/work-of-the-week/19-lachrymae/>

<http://www.americanviolasociety.org/PDFs/Journal/JAVS-13.3.pdf>

<https://www.allmusic.com/composition/lachrymae-reflections-on-a-song-of-dowland-for-viol-piano-op-48-mc0002368840>